Dear Chairman Gilliss and Members of the Baltimore County School Board,

This Tuesday, March 6, the Baltimore County School Board will discuss and possibly vote on a contract with Daly Computers for the purchase of 133,000 tablets at a cost of $140 million dollars over seven years. In the strongest terms possible, I urge you to vote against this contract and delay any additional purchase of these devices for at least a year.

It is important to note that Daly Computers was the initial vendor (2014) chosen by the BCPS. Four brands of devices were evaluated by BCPS. The tablets sold to the BCPS by Daly were rated third best of the four tablets tested.

I was very disturbed by the following quote from an article titled "How Silicon Valley Plans to Conquer the Classroom" in the November 3, 2017 issue of the New York Times:

"If benefits are flowing in both directions, with payments from schools to vendors," said Rob Reich, a political-science professor at Stanford University, "and dinner and travel going to the school leaders, it's a pay-for-play arrangement."

As you all well know, the article focused on Baltimore County's digital conversion and industry relationship.

While I am not alleging that the implications of this high profile article are necessarily true, given the widespread public perception of the state of the Baltimore County school system, it is incumbent that three things must take place before proceeding with the purchase of additional tablets:

1. In light of the indictment of the former Baltimore County Superintendent of Schools and in the wake of allegations against him related to money he received for consultant work, it is imperative that an independent audit of the county school system contracts with education technology companies be performed by the State of Maryland. I urge the Board to abandon plans to commission its own audit. As a former auditor, I would have much more confidence in an audit conducted by the Maryland General Assembly Office of Legislative Audits or the State Department of Education (MSDE). This coming year, the State aid to our County Public School System will exceed $700 million. If I were a School

Board member, given public perceptions, I would want to separate myself totally from any decisions regarding an audit.

2. I am in the process of requesting that MSDE conduct a performance audit to evaluate the effectiveness, economy and the efficiency of BCPS Students and Teachers Accessing Tomorrow (STAT) initiative. The reason I think this is necessary is that Baltimore County taxpayers need to be assured that the STAT program is providing positive learning outcomes for BCPS students. I urge the Board to support this action. While BCPS did commission a study evaluating the STAT program through the Johns Hopkins University, I found its product to have limited value. Specifically, there are a number of charts in the STAT Year Three Evaluation - Student Achievement dated December 2017, which I consider misleading. Early PARCC results show that lighthouse schools more often than not scored worse than non-lighthouse counterparts in comparable geographic neighborhoods. For example, twice the percentage of students at Rodgers Forge Elementary - a Lighthouse school - scored in the "not yet met" category, compared to Stoneleigh Elementary - a non-Lighthouse school - in English in the third grade (11% versus 5.4%). Page 3 of the December 2017 Report has two charts which show proficiency changes in mathematics and language arts from 2015 to 2017 for Lighthouse students, as compared to students in three other school districts and Maryland at large. The charts show that the Lighthouse students' percentage improvement exceeded those of the three other districts and the state.   I am encouraged that there was improvement. However, it would have been helpful to see the improvement made by non Lighthouse students, as well. As I stated, the first year achievement results for Lighthouse students were, on average, lower than non Lighthouse students.   With the improvement by Lighthouse over three years, is their 2017 level of achievement now equal to non Lighthouse students? Is it lower or higher? The study is not clear on this. The charts on pages 4 through 7 of the December 2017 report compare the student achievement at Lighthouse schools from Year 1 to Year 3, compared to three other school districts and Maryland at large. On a consistent basis, the Lighthouse student achievement was very close to the state average, below two of the other districts and above one district. For these charts to be meaningful, the average of the achievement of non Lighthouse students should have been included.

3. Over the next 17 months, it is imperative that the school system review the STAT program for all grade levels and reform it with the aim of making it more effective from the standpoint of achievement and cost. After the first year of the STAT program, the academic evaluation of the Lighthouse schools revealed serious shortcomings with the implementation of the program. Instead of expanding the program the second year, it would have been smarter and made more sense to evaluate carefully the STAT program, make changes and continue the Lighthouse pilot for one more year. The school district wanted a device that would work for both youngsters who could not type and for high schoolers. In early 2014, a particularly complex machine, an HP laptop, which converts to a tablet, was chosen. Thus, the same tablets are used by students from Kindergarten through high school.

While all three recommendations are in process, in order to prevent any disruption to current students in the STAT program, I propose that tablets be transferred to high schools from kindergarten through grade 2 (or 3). That will ensure that students who currently participate in the STAT program will be able to continue in future years.

I realize that, at the end of the present school year, computers and devices given to teachers and the ten Lighthouse schools must be returned to the vendor. The devices remaining in the non Lighthouse schools, when transferred, should be enough to enable a measured expansion into high school, thus allowing students currently in the STAT program to continue.   Regarding the computers currently held by teachers, BCPS should consider renting them for one more year or purchasing new ones, whichever option is the most cost effective and beneficial.

As you are aware, BCPS struggles to keep facilities up to date. Many of our over 110,000 students attend spacious new schools. Some older schools, however, are overcrowded and require trailers as overflow classrooms. In some of the schools tap water runs brown. In addition, in budget documents, the district said it lacked the "dedicated resources" for students with disabilities.

It is never easy to establish spending priorities with limited resources. I believe we can reduce our financial commitment to STAT by revamping the program, while achieving our goal of improving academic performance.

Thank you for your attention to this issue and your service to the students and citizens of Baltimore County. Again, I urge you to please reject the contract to purchase 133,000 devices from the Daly Computers.

Sincerely,

Wade Kach
Baltimore County Councilman, District 3